

THE CUSTER MASSACRE.

The Story of the Memorable Fight Graphically Told

BY SERGEANT HOBERT RYDER

Of the Wheeling Recruiting Station, a member of the Famous Seventh Cavalry, Custer's Regiment. — He Tells an "Intelligencer" Reporter the Story of the Awful Slaughter on the Little Big Horn, and the Events Leading Up to It.

OF a great proportion of the people of Wheeling are aware of the existence in the city of a United States army recruiting station, where recruits for the army are enlisted. Captain C. C. Hewitt, of the Nineteenth Infantry, is the officer in command of the station, and the recruiting officer is First Sergeant Hobart Ryder, of the famous Seventh Cavalry, the gallant and dead Custer's old regiment. The sergeant is a veteran, having enlisted in the regular army in the early seventies, previous to which he had served during the war in an Illinois regiment, and has seen much service in the west among the Indians. In a conversation with an INTELLIGENCER reporter, Sergeant Ryder mentioned that he was with the Seventh at the time of that terrible disaster on the Little Big Horn in Montana, in 1876, when General Custer and nearly three hundred courages met death at the hands of the murderous Sioux. It will be remembered that Custer divided his force on that fatal twenty-fifth of June, and Sergeant Ryder was with the detachment under Major Reno, otherwise he would not be here to tell his interesting and realistic story of that memorable struggle.

Before giving his story it is necessary to recall the preliminary circumstances which brought on the Little Big Horn fight, the prototype of which is not found in the annals of any other army. Throughout the summer of 1876, while the country at large was celebrating the centennial anniversary of American independence, a considerable portion of the army was having hot work out in Dakota and Montana with the Sioux Indians. This tribe with the possible exception of the Arizona Apaches is the fiercest and most murderous with which the government has to contend with. At this time under the leadership of the renowned Sitting Bull, who did not



GENERAL CUSTER.

meet with his just deserts until fourteen years later, the Sioux were on the war path. The discovery of gold on a portion of their reservation in Dakota had attracted a horde of white fortune seekers who, without regard to the warning of Secretary Zach Chandler, of the interior department and of the commissioner of Indian affairs, collected in large numbers in the new gold fields. The Sioux who had been wanting an excuse to go on the war path, eagerly took this one, and committed numberless murders and depredations throughout Montana and Dakota.

In the latter part of June some three thousand Sioux warriors under Sitting Bull were congregated in the region about the mouth of the Little Big Horn river where it joins the Big Horn.

On the 22nd General Terry sent Custer with the entire Seventh Cavalry to reconnoitre the position and strength of the Indians. The sergeant tells the following story, first relating one of the causes of the battle.

THE SERGEANT'S STORY.

"One of the causes," said the sergeant, "leading to the battle of the Little Big Horn was the arrest of an Uncapapah chief named Rain-in-the-Face by General Custer's orders for the killing of a veterinary surgeon and a post trader. While on the Yellowstone expedition of '73 Custer discovered that the Indians who had killed these men were under Rain-in-the-Face. He sent down to Standing Rock agency fifty men under command of Lieutenant Tom Custer and arrested the Indians. Rain-in-the-Face told Lieutenant Custer at the time that he would get his scalp in time. Rain-in-the-Face was taken to Fort Abraham Lincoln, North Dakota, and confined in the guard house, but made his escape in a short time. He knew that it was certain death if he returned to his agency, so he joined Sitting Bull, who was on the war path at that time



CUSTER'S LAST CHARGE.

and with several hundred warriors. In the spring of '76 Rain-in-the-Face sent his runners to Standing Rock and called out all his warriors to the number of 2,000, and was joined by all the bad Indians from agencies along the Missouri river to the number of about 1,000. They joined Sitting Bull, who had at that time about 2,000; they met in the Rose Bud Valley, Montana. General Custer received information from his scouts that there were big Indian trails all going in the direction of the Little Horn river, and reported these facts to the war department and got permission

to take his regiment, the Seventh cavalry, under command of General Terry, who had most of the Seventh infantry and one battalion of the Second cavalry under him, all to meet on the Little Missouri at Stanley crossing. This was done about June 1, 1876. Custer then got permission of General Terry to take four troops of his regiment and scout up the Little Missouri river, and also had Major Reno take four troops and scout in the direction of the Rose Bud. Custer after going up the river about forty miles and not finding any trails returned, but Major Reno on his return reported to Custer that he had discovered several large Indian trails and all leading in the direction of the Rose Bud Valley.

"Custer then got permission from General Terry to take the Seventh cavalry and go after the Indians. General Terry says that he told General Custer he could go and locate the Indians, after which he was to send him word and wait until he could bring up the Seventh infantry and the four troops of the Second cavalry. Custer, after bidding General Terry and his officers good by, started for Powder river to park his trains and upon arriving there he left all his supply wagons and extra horses, taking with him only pack mules, and leaving a part of his regiment as a strong guard. He then left in hot haste for the Rose Bud. Upon hearing that he found eight large Indian trails, all coming together at the Rose Bud. Custer then started to catch up with the Indians, passing about three of their camps a day before he would go into camp, which would be about twelve o'clock at night. No fires were allowed or matches to be lit. No horse was al-



IN A SLAUGHTER PEN.

lowed to have his saddle off and the men had no blankets or tents along and had to sleep on the ground holding their horses. The start in the morning was made about two hours before daylight, as Custer knew that Indians were watching him from the start. The Indians were caught up with early on the morning of June 25 on the divide between the Rose Bud and Little Big Horn rivers. Custer there halted his command and had the officer's call sounded. He then gave each officer orders to have all saddle cinches made tight and in place. He then ordered Major Reno to take three troops, each having about forty-five men, to go down to the Little Big Horn river, cross over, and if the Indians were not too strong, engage them. Captain Benton was ordered to take three troops; go to a large camp up the river, which proved to contain no Indians. One troop was sent back to guard the pack train and bring it up as soon as possible, as our ammunition was back with them. Custer kept five troops. Major Reno crossed over the river and started towards a large body of Indians down the Little Big Horn.

"The Indians, seeing Major Reno coming, set fire to the grass which burnt between them and Reno, so as to shield their movements. While we were moving up near the Indians Custer's command was seen on the divide above us across the river, and at that moment there was a great commotion near the Indian camp. We soon saw through the smoke what looked like a stampede among the Indians, large bodies of them running away from us, driving a great herd of ponies, but we soon found out these were squaws driving their ponies out of danger of capture. Squaws can't, at a distance, be told from bucks, both wearing blankets around them. This is what is thought by a number of Reno's commands to be the cause of Custer's destruction. We supposed that seeing what he supposed to be the whole body of the Indians retreating, he came to the conclusion that if three troops under Reno could drive them like that, he with his five troops could head them off and capture them. But the Indians divided up, leaving enough to keep Reno busy, while the main body formed an arc, bush for Custer by hiding behind trees, logs, brush and the river bank. Reno, finding that the Indians were too strong for him to rout, dismounted his command, formed a line across the valley and fought them there until he saw that he was being surrounded, when he gave orders for his men to mount and get ready to charge. In a few moments, however, he came to the conclusion that it would be better to go back and join Custer and report. Custer had at that time, however, with his command been killed, but nothing of that was known until the next day when Terry came up.

"As Reno started the Indians closed in on him killing and wounding several officers and men. Reno after reaching the divide met the troops with the pack train coming in and asked the officer where Custer was, but he was equally ignorant of his whereabouts. Captain Benton came up soon after and stated he did not know where Custer went. The Indians surrounded the hill on which was posted what was left of the Seventh cavalry. In the afternoon there was seen a large column of troops going back on our trail, with our uniform on and guidons flying. We thought this body was Custer leaving us to our fate. Major Reno had several of his trumpeters sound calls to attract the attention of what we thought was Custer's command.

THE MASSACRE.

"This body, however, turned out to be Sitting Bull's and Rain-in-the-Face's Indians, dressed in the uniforms of Custer's column, and with colors flying they were by this movement endeavoring to deceive Major Reno, and get him to leave his strong position on the hill, when on the river bottom they could easily with their overpowering force surround us as they had previously done with General Custer's force, and exterminate the entire command. Reno, however, saw through the ruse and remained on the hill. It was not until the morning of the 28th, Monday, that Terry with a large command from Fort Lincoln arrived and relieved Reno from his perilous position, where he was surrounded by several thousand red devils. All through that terrible night we remained, by that time thoroughly realizing our desperate position and alarmed at the continued and unexplained absence of Custer.

There was a small depression on the hill, in which the wounded were placed as they were struck. The horses, most of which were killed, were placed around the wounded serving as a barrier

cade and protecting those behind from the fire of the Indians. The latter made several charges on us on the hill, but were always beaten back. All through the night we suffered for water, of which the supply had long since been exhausted. But for the arrival of General Terry we would soon have been starved out.

"General Terry was the first officer to discover what had become of Custer, as with his force he had to march directly past the spot where the massacre took place. Terry then proceeded to our relief, and gave us the first news of Custer's fate. With tears running down his face he grasped the hand of our gallant commander, Reno, and told him that we were all that was left of the Seventh cavalry, not a living soul remaining of the force Custer took out the day before. Custer with his whole command had been massacred down on the river bottom.

We started for the scene of the terrible struggle which we soon reached. We found on going over the ground that Custer had been caught in a "U" shaped ambush, and that the Indians had allowed them to get fairly in the ambush, when it was closed behind, and at a signal the red devils sprang from every direction, and opened fire on the little band, keeping it up until the last man dropped. The indications pointed to the fact that there were ten Indians to each trooper. We found but two of the victims scalped, Lieutenants Custer and Cook. Later it was learned that Rain-in-the-Face had carried out his threat and scalped the former officer.

There were numerous instances of deeds of atrocity and torture to the wounded. One man was found whose legs were almost cut off at the hips, and his body thrown back onto his limbs, face up, and in that position slowly bled to death. The Indian who was guilty of this outrage was a squaw. It was witnessed by an officer, interpreter and a sergeant, who had been cut off from Reno's column and had taken refuge in the thick underbrush near the scene of the massacre. The interpreter had his horse along with him, and as soon as the party was hid he threw his horse, tied his legs with a lariat, and stuffed grass into his nostrils, so the animal could not neigh. But for this precaution they would not have got away alive, as there were thousands of Indians all around them.

"The bodies of two officers, one of them General Sturgis' son, and several enlisted men, were never found. It is supposed their captors took them away and burnt them at the stake.

"But one creature came out of the Custer fight alive, that was Captain Keogh's horse, Comanche, who was more dead than alive, having been wounded seven times. He was taken by boat to Abraham Lincoln where he finally recovered."

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